A Bully’s Rhetoric

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Imagine waking up every morning dreading encountering anyone at school. You try to piece yourself together to put a smile on your face, but no one seems to smile back. You walk the halls wondering if the group of students you pass are making cruel jokes about you; though, you keep walking with your head down right past them. You feel as if you are being punished for simply being yourself, and you can’t make it one more day feeling this unbearable way. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015) stated that the pain of being bullied pushes around 4,400 students to take their own lives every year. According to NoBullying.com (2013) over 14 percent of high school students have considered suicide and 7 percent have attempted it. How do bullies have the power to convince these students that their life is not worth living? Bullies have their own form of rhetoric strategies that are capable of changing what others think about themselves. Not only are they able to persuade the victim to believe the words they are saying, or typing, but they are able to convince others to join in on the taunting words as well. There is a plethora of ways that students verbally bully other students, but which has the most impact?

Before looking at how bullies work their destructive language, what a verbal bully is must be determined. A bully is someone who uses verbal abuse to gain control over another person- demining in nature. There are many things that can be considered when discussing verbal abuse: tone, content, and exclusion. Tariq Thowfeek (2007) defined verbal abuse as “any kind of repeated pattern of inappropriate, derogatory or threatening speech directed at one individual by another” (Thowfeek). Bullies can be physically abusive as well; but when they use words as their weapon, it is easier for them to get away with it. Thowfeek (2007) stated, “Unlike physical wounds, that heal naturally leaving only a scar, verbal and emotional wounds, left untreated, tend not to heal” (Thowfeek). Therefore, the saying “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” is a lie told to children at a young age to try and protect them from the insulting words that will come their way as soon as they enter into elementary school.

Bullies are able to use words to dehumanize people. If they are seen as objects, all morals about the devastating effects their words can have become irrelevant. One of these steps is using the opposite of person first language which is a term typically referred to when discussing disabilities. Person first language is used when the person is referred to before the disability. An example of this is saying “a person that has a cognitive impairment” rather than “a retarded person.” Bullies use this idea in the opposite way by categorizing a person based on their appearance, sexual identity, or their values. They undermine the fact that the person they are insulting is someone equal to them by making the labels define them and override who they truly are.

Countering and discounting is one technique that bullies use to convince their victim that they are wrong. It is a powerful tool they use that enforces that the victim has no control over what they think or how they feel. Countering is the first step that “dismisses the victim’s feelings” by flat out telling them their opinion is wrong (Brogaard, 2015). Berit Brogaard, D.M.Sci. Ph.D, conveyed that following the contouring is the discounting in which they make the victim feel as if they do not have the right to an opinion (Brogaard, 2015). This creates a sense of power for the bully with something as simple as thinking their way is the only way. The reality of the victim is disturbed; it causes them to lose sight of what is true in their life. Trusting people becomes very difficult after being told that they are not entitled to their own feelings. In the bully’s eyes there is no mediation, there is only their way which is right, and everyone who thinks differently is wrong (Thowfeek, 2007).

Have you ever been the target of someone’s irrational yelling? This is a form of bullying called “abusive anger” according to Patricia Evans (Evens, 2002). This is a type of verbal abuse that people are very familiar with. It can be considered as someone demanding something. Such as students demanding another student to “shut up,” or in some cases to “go kill themselves.” As displayed there is a wide variety of abusive anger, but every variation has a negative effect on the victim’s emotional state.

A very persuasive and popular form of verbal bulling is name calling. For young children it might be the most innocent form of bullying, but as the years go on the names become more brutal. Name calling can be a playful way to interact with one another, but there is a definite line that can be crossed. When someone is purposefully giving a hurtful name to someone else in the aspiration of it causing emotional harm, that is when the line is crossed. The list of name’s that students use to bully their classmates is endless and sometimes can be surprisingly creative. The idea of these “names” is to put a label on a person, much like the misuse of person first language. This form of bullying can do a horrific amount of damage to the victim; because it takes a victim’s insecurities and enhances them. It can even create insecurities that were non-existent before.

Bullying has evolved over the generations along with the language that is used to bully. In the article *How Has Bullying Changed Over the Years* (200, it is stated, “A bully in the 1950’s would have probably been defined as someone who singles out weak classmates and picks on them in a physical way. Hitting, kicking, punching…that was bullying.” In 1969, a revolutionary tool came out that changed the world of bullying forever – the internet. Now, kids can hide behind a screen and say whatever judgmental thoughts come to their heads without feeling guilty about seeing the other person face-to-face. It dehumanizes the victim into a username on a computer screen, making the bully think that what they are doing is okay. The internet transformed bullying into a type of writing rather than a spoken language. This form of bullying that takes place electronically is called “cyberbullying.” One of the many factors that makes cyberbullying different is that it works 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In the past, before texting and I-messaging were relevant, the bullying would end once the school day was over. The student being bullied could go home to a safe spot where the mean words and abuse would end. Now, it never ends. It can also be posted anonymously, making it easier for the bully to get away with. DoSmething.org, an organization created to support social change, claimed, “About 75% of students admit they have visited a website bashing another student.”

For some, it is common sense that killing someone else for being different is morally wrong. It is difficult to understand what would go through someone’s mind to think that there would be an acceptable reason for it, but during the Holocaust, Hitler was able to pursued the people of Germany that the Jewish people were useless. In this example, Hitter, much like any other terrorist leaders, is the ultimate bully. He was able to make his followers believe that they should feel threatened by the Jewish people and make a murderer out of the average person. His followers saw him as a leader, but there were many aspects that proved this to be wrong. Students participate in this type of bullying by leading others to believe what they are saying about another student is true. In a way spreading rumors is the tactic that these “leaders” use, which is very common among the culture of bullying.

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